

I come to you in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When I worked as a Campus Ministry Intern at Kansas State University, one of my primary responsibilities was waking up three college students (all freshman my first year) and arriving at the local Episcopal Church by 6am every Tuesday morning to start prepping breakfast. At St. Paul's, the aforementioned local Episcopal Church, the "Happy Kitchen" opened every Tuesday morning at 7:30am, feeding for free anyone who wanted to stop by for a hot meal, served to order (mostly), and delivered to you at the table. You could get pancakes, biscuits and gravy, homestyle potatoes (with a spicy kick), scrambled eggs, and breakfast burritos. During the school year it was the responsibility of the campus ministry program to staff the workers for this meal, which we did each week, along with help from our great friend Jeff, another student from a different campus ministry group that was very passionate about this outreach.

This program was well known in Manhattan, Kansas. The local Christian Radio station often sent their morning team to pick up to go meals (leaving a very generous donation each month) and they provided free advertising about the meal to its listeners. We were also on the list of places to go to get a free meal in Manhattan. These factors led to us having a number of regulars that we saw each week (and would become concerned when we didn't see).

One regular was a middle-aged gentlemen who while poor was not homeless like the group he often hung out with each Tuesday (and around town as well), but like most of that group he spent time with was a firm believer that the King James Version of the Bible, specifically the 1611 version with the "proper name" of Jesus translated as Yashua. He was a big fan of a particular televangelist and sent most of the little money he had to that church organization to promote the conversion of heathens all over the world. He even travelled from time to time to participate in the

passing out of tracks (those little booklets about hell and damnation for those not saved by Christ) at major events like college football games.

Part of this man's theology, or at least the parroted theology he had received, was that homosexuality was a great sin, and while we were very nice for giving him breakfast each week, we were all destined to go to hell because we were part of the gay church. I often sat with this man to talk about this and many other beliefs he held, gently pushing back against what I saw as misguided or at least worthy of pondering further.

One day, this gentleman was railing hard against "the gays" and was spouting off scripture that "clearly" damned them to hell as abominations. This particular day, I just piped out from the kitchen, "1 John, Chapter 4, God is love!" And it stopped him in his tracks. I came out of the kitchen to sit with him, and we began to talk about the power of love, and if God is love, as the Bible clearly states, how could our LGBTQ+ brothers and sisters who clearly showed that love of God to each other in their relationships, to the church, to me, to him, then how could they be damned to hell if they were of God? And, it moved him. It inspired him to at the very least consider a shift in his understanding. I don't think he changed his theology on the matter, at least not in the time we still crossed paths, but he never again brought it up as a point of contention, when it had been a main thrust up to that point.

And this shift, even if it was the slightest of shifts, happened because of the truth that is held within 1 John, Chapter 4: love is from God, because God is love. And when this reality truly hits a person's heart, the fear, the hate, the distrust, the pain, is melted away, it is cast out.

Fear is about punishment. Fear is about not knowing the other, not listening to the other, not seeing the other, the love of the other that is of God. Fear punishes. It lashes out and punishes

those who are deemed different, who are deemed lesser, who are deemed less than. And in lashing out, it buries deeper into our hearts, supplanting love, causing pain within our very souls, a pain that causes us to fear more, only to experience even more pain as we spiral.

Fear is the clear driving force of our society today. Fear is what leads to unarmed black men being shot at 20 times in their grandma's backyard for holding a cell phone and simply matching the description of a suspect (black male, 20s, average height and build, that's descriptive enough to execute someone, right?). Fear is what leads to trans\* brothers and sisters being subjected to violence for the sin of loving themselves enough to be honest about who they are. Fear is what leads to gay and lesbian and queer teens to run away from home, creating an epidemic of teenage homelessness (an issue that is just as prevalent here in Spokane as it is anywhere in our country, just head down to Cup of Cool Water to see it for yourself). Fear is what drives teenagers to commit suicide at epidemic rates (the rate has doubled in Spokane in the last five years). Fear is what drives people to commit acts of mass murder. Fear is what keeps us from regulating the one thing that makes most of those acts of violence so disgustingly easy.

What do you fear?

What fear drives you to hold onto the false promises of this world?

Our fear as a society is punishing us. It is causing a damning reality: we garner more fear about something like this (whatever flavor of this it might be this week) happening to me, to someone I care for, and our fear causes us to lash out, to try and distance ourselves from the situation, "that can't happen here," "they must've done something to deserve it," "they're not real kids, they're crisis actors," "I need this gun to protect my family," these responses to fear with more

fear (for hate, denial, demeaning, are all forms of fear) compounds the fear that is deeply rooted in our hearts, leaving room for little else.

So, what do we do?

How do we respond to the fear that is in us by virtue of our presence in a society that demands it be there?

How do we stop punishing ourselves?

This is where I think the Gospel fills in the narrative around the theology that God is love. Jesus today speaks in metaphor about a vine and its branches. God as the tender of this vine prunes those branches that bear fruit so that they may bear more fruit, and those vines that bear no fruit are removed, they wither and die. The vines that bear fruit clearly do so in the love of God that they display to the world, in the love of God that they put into the world. Those that bear no fruit try to hoard that love out of fear that there isn't enough, enough for them to truly be saved, enough for others to share in that salvation. When we allow fear to dominate, we cause our own withering. We cannot be surprised when we are pruned from the vine, because we are taking and taking, when we are called to give in the fruit that we produce through the connection we have to God through Christ, to give that fruit of love that is wholly and surely God.

And it really should not be shocking to hear this. Jesus clearly states today, "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me," or to put it more bluntly, apart from me, apart from the God of love, apart from this vine and the one who tends it, you can do *nothing*. You can use your fear to try and punish. You can use your fear to try and control this world. But none of that is productive. None of that creates life. None of that gives life to you, to others, to creation. Only love can do that. So, choose love. Just like the

gentleman from the “Happy Kitchen,” choose love and allow it to shift your heart. You’re not going to change everything immediately, but given time and love, you will change eventually.

When we choose love, when we choose to live into the reality that God is love, and that we know God through love, that we share God with our love, that “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God”, that “love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment because as he is so are we in this world”, that “there is no fear in love but perfect love casts out fear,” this is when we bear fruit.

“Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” They are living into their fear, they are the branch that is to be pruned, to wither and die, for it separates itself from the vine. We are called to bear fruit, to bear the fruit of justice and peace that is of God, to bear the fruit of acceptance and affirmation that is of God, to bear the fruit of listening with open hearts to those who have been oppressed, subjected to violence, subjected to ridicule, ostracized and made to feel other, lesser, and then bear the fruit of change based on what we have heard. These are the fruits we are called to bear for these fruits are fruits of love. Love for our neighbor. Love for ourselves in refusing to live in fear. Love for and of God. This is why Jesus died and rose again for us. This is why you are here at church today. This is why we send you from this place proclaiming that you go in peace to love and serve the Lord, to go in peace and bear fruit.

Amen.